The Home of the Aryans: A Reality Check

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

— Silver Blaze (The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes)

Thus did Holmes inimitably point out the central evidence, which, in one stroke, circumscribed the problem and reduced everything else to merely matters of fine detail.

Over the last couple of decades, a wealth of evidence has been thrown up by archaeology, geology, anthropology and genetics, which similarly circumscribes the problem of the origin of the Vedic people, or *Aryans* as some might prefer to call them. Unfortunately, for reasons best known to them, the writers of history textbooks in India – the one country that would be most eager to know the latest about this question – have done exceedingly well to keep this evidence from hundreds of millions of students.

To the average, high school-educated Indian, the Indo-European *Aryans* were natives of a home that has been said to be anywhere from Scandinavia to the Caucasus. Tribes of roving, equestrian, Iron Age nomads – a poetically fanciful image, sufficiently suggestive of the several barbarian horse-cultures of Central Asia – they radiated out from their home, some of them eventually reaching India around 1900 BCE. Here, they swooped down on the hapless, city-dwelling "Dravidian" Harappans, who were so civilized as to be unaware of war. Their brilliant civilization was obliterated. Some were

slaughtered, some were pushed south, and the rest were subjugated by the masterstroke of the caste system by the invaders. Almost instantly making the transition to a sedentary, agricultural lifestyle, the "pastoral" Aryans spread from the Punjab to the Gangetic plains between 1900-1500 BCE, while developing culturally at a break-neck speed, composing the Vedas, a literature of a grandeur and volume unmatched by any of their supposed Indo-European cousins they had left behind on their way, who had been settled for longer than them.

But, for the two centuries that these theories held sway, was there ever any hard material or scientific evidence? Amazingly, apart from very dodgy linguistic "reasoning", there wasn't any semblance of evidence. Is there any hard evidence that the Harappan Civilization was Dravidian? Are there any signs of human-inflicted destruction at Harappan sites? Is there even a single mention anywhere in the Vedic literature of a foreign home? How sound is the reasoning used in arriving at the date of around 1500 BCE, currently given for the composition of the Rig Veda?

Prejudice in historical interpretation

The historian, Will Durant had said, "Most history is guessing, and the rest is prejudice." European scholars in pre-Independence India were galled to find that the ancestors of the natives had produced the earliest literature in the world, and such a fantastic one at that. Equally upsetting it was for the mainly British archaeologists up to the 1950s to discover in the subcontinent, the remains of a splendid urban culture as old as Egypt and Mesopotamia. They moved quickly to attribute the Vedic language and culture to a race of "fair-skinned, light-haired" invaders from the West, such as

themselves, who subjugated the culture of the “dark-skinned, snub-nosed natives”. And sadly, like Jemubhai Popatlal Patel in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, such a colonial mindset still characterizes many Indian scholars and textbook writers. Then, there are historians with transparent leftist leanings, who, like leftist historians elsewhere in the world, almost instinctively play down the merits of their home culture. Dilip K. Chakrabarti, Professor of South Asian Archaeology at Cambridge University, deplores “the sophistication with which such neo-colonial theories are put forward” and “the gullibility with which they are accepted as pure scholarship by Third World scholars.”

To complicate things further, directly pitted against these two schools is the Hindutva brigade. The natural casualty of this situation is objectivity.

Thankfully, in the last few decades, the area has been taken over by American archaeologists like George F. Dales, Jr., Richard Meadow, Kenneth A. R. Kennedy, J. Mark Kenoyer and Gregory L. Possehl, among others, who are relatively free from the prejudices of the earlier Europeans, and many distinguished archaeologists of the subcontinent like S. R. Rao, B. B. Lal, M. Rafique Mughal and Chakrabarti. The light they have thrown upon the origins of civilization in South Asia has been immense.

The “demise” of the Harappan Civilization

Archaeological evidence today tells us that, in the first place, the Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization simply **did not die out** and get replaced by another distinct culture, as was hitherto thought. Rather, owing to a complex combination of factors, there was a dramatic decline in prosperity, accompanied by de-urbanization.

Owing to a decline in rainfall, the number of Harappan sites in what is today Pakistan plummeted, while that on the Indian side shot up around 2000 BCE. Yet another major factor was the constant shifting of course and, ultimately, outright drying up of important rivers owing to tectonic and glacial changes, which rendered such a sophisticated urban civilization unsustainable. To adapt to this fluctuating scenario, the population was forced to revert to a more temporal pastoral lifestyle. Even the irrigation pattern shows a pronounced change at around this time.

In fact, occupation of many Harappan sites – including Harappa itself – continued right up to 1300 BCE (this period from 1900-1300 BCE has come to be called "Late Harappan"), and there are several Early Historic (*i.e.*, 1st millennium BCE) settlements immediately around many of these sites, some of which continue to be inhabited to this day! In other words, there is only evidence of continuity throughout, not of any disruptive break.

The eastern limit of the "Indus Valley" Civilization is also not definitely known – sites have been found east of the Yamuna and as far down south as the Godavari valley in Maharashtra.

The "settlements of the Vedic people"

Further, our textbooks teach us that the *Aryans* introduced iron technology into the subcontinent (the Harappans were a Bronze Age people). This fact had apparently worked to their advantage in their onslaught on the Harappans. So, while the Vedas were supposedly composed when the *Aryans* were still in the throes of settling down in Punjab, the Later Vedic Period corresponds with the so-called Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sites of

the Gangetic plains (1100-350 BCE). These Iron Age PGW sites are where the events of the Epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – supposedly took place.

How was this conclusion arrived at? It was reasoned that the word *ayas*, which occurs in the Vedas, may mean iron. Will you call that conclusive? Or is it a case of forcing facts to fit pre-conceived theories?

Be that as it may, at many sites in Punjab and Haryana, many Late Harappan settlements were found interlocked with PGW ones – once again, it turns out to be a case of continuity of settlements, not a break!

Iron in India

The forcible interpretation of the Vedic *ayas* as iron is itself difficult to accept. Confounding the current cozy identification of the Vedic Period with PGW sites further is the fact that evidence has been found at some sites in Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Vidarbha that iron smelting technology was already known in the subcontinent right from the early 2nd millennium BCE. Still surprisingly, iron pieces have been found at many sites of the "Bronze Age" Harappan civilization! Such evidence effectively kills the theory that iron technology was introduced into the subcontinent by a foreign population.

It is worth noting here that, although iron melts at a much higher temperature than copper, by the proper use of chemical fluxes, iron can also be smelted at temperatures very similar to those used for copper (the major component of bronze). It was such "low-temperature" processes that were anyway used for smelting iron in the subcontinent centuries after it had entered the so-called Iron Age.

Anthropology and genetics

For all the talk about an Aryan invasion, anthropologists have not found the skeletons at Harappan sites to be any different from those at what are currently believed to be settlements of the Vedic people. There is no break in the anthropological record from archaeological sites in the subcontinent at the time the invasion is supposed to have taken place; there is just no evidence of any foreign population having entered the subcontinent.

Further, it is found that Indians – whether North Indian or Dravidian language-speaking South Indian – are anthropologically quite similar to each other and, in fact, quite mixed up, irrespective of language and caste.

This is exactly what genetics finds too: there is nothing to suggest that there has been a contribution to the gene pool of Indians from outside the subcontinent anytime within the last 8,000 years and that Indians are genetically very "mixed up". What is more, inspite of the great diversity of languages and cultures, South Asians may well constitute a distinct – and major – human "race" unto their own!

The dog in the night-time: the curious case of the River Sarasvati

Given the hallowed status of the River Ganga since time immemorial, some readers may be surprised to note that, for the Vedic people, the Ganga was just any other river. In the time of the Rig Veda, that pride of place belonged to the River Sarasvati, which finds mention seventy-six times to the Ganga's two! The descriptions of the Sarasvati in the Rig Veda also leave no-one in doubt as to the fact that it was a very mighty river, and that the Vedic people revered it as the cradle of their culture. Later

literature mentions the Sarasvati drying up in the sands instead of extending all the way up to the sea as it did previously, and, subsequently, vanishing altogether. Many scholars believed that it was a mythical river or, at best, an allegory.

Imagine, then, how surprised archaeo-geologist Henri-Paul Francfort and his Indo-French team must have been to find, in the early 1980s, images of the Landsat satellite showing the ancient bed of a huge, long-extinct river coursing through what is today the Thar/Cholistan desert. Its remnant is the present-day non-seasonal Ghaggar-Hakra. Geologists were able to reconstruct that this river had previously drained into the Arabian Sea, but later came to end in the sands near Fort Derawar in Pakistan, before vanishing around 1900 BCE – at around which time the decline of the Harappan Civilization begins. Curiously, three times as many "Indus Valley"-style sites have been found on the banks of this river than have been found on the banks of the Indus itself, and more continue to be excavated!

Following some very obvious clues, such as the location of this mighty river between the Yamuna and the Indus as mentioned in the literature, the events during its lifetime, and the discovery of its channels exactly where mentioned by the Vedic sage Sindhukshita, son of Priyamedha, in the *Nadi Stuti* of the Rig Veda, this river has been universally identified as the Vedic Sarasvati. Thus, the possibility of a considerable overlap – if not outright identity – of the Vedic culture with the Harappan Civilization forced itself upon us. Archaeologists have now begun to use the name, "Indus-Sarasvati Civilization".

It is no rocket science to figure out that the Vedic literature may be a few millennia older than Euro-centric theories have traditionally admitted. How else were the

Vedic people to know of the existence of the Sarasvati if it dried up before they arrived, or were just arriving, in the subcontinent? And, if they had not been living along its banks for millennia, why would they eulogise a dead, or dying, river as the cradle of their culture, deifying her as the goddess of learning and culture?

It is extremely suggestive that, to this day, millions of Indians, on the occasion of *Sarasvati Puja*, make an offering – of all cereals – of barley, which was the staple crop of the Harappans for millennia in the Indus-Sarasvati region (the staple on the Gangetic plains was wheat and, further east, rice).

Some false problems

Why, it is asked, are there no remains of horses – which figure in the Vedas – in the Harappan cities? Remains of what are believed to be the true horse appear to have been found at Harappan sites. Some archaeologists have disputed this, but it can no longer be said for sure that horse remains are definitely absent. Why is the horse never represented on the Indus seals? Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: the Indus seals probably do not depict several animals which may well have been known to the Harappans. Neither can the seals be assumed to depict everything known to the Harappans nor is there any reason to think that we have all designs to ever have been used on their seals. However, figurines have been found at Harappan sites of what reasonably appear to be horses, judging by their bushy tails and mane. Then, other ancient civilizations such as the Mesopotamian are not teeming with horse remains either.

Some scholars argue that the depictions on the Harappan seals show a religion that is altogether different from the Vedic – such as that of Pashupati Shiva, the "Mother

Goddess", and the Bull. Firstly, there is no compulsion that cults other than the Vedic (based around *devas* like Indra, Varuna etc.) should not co-exist with the latter. Then, the cult of Shiva is definitely a component of Hinduism as we know it, and the Yogic posture in which he is shown on the seals is definitely quintessentially Vedic. As for the "Mother Goddess" and the Bull figures, the noted scholar F. R. Allchin has already observed that, far from being non-Vedic, these pictorial representations appear to uncannily match Vedic descriptions of figures like Aditi and concepts like Creation.

Significantly, several fire-altars – a Vedic trademark – have been found at some Harappan sites.

Also, as has been said above, these are merely matters of fine detail – the hard evidence for an overlap between the Vedic and Harappan cultures in the form of the river Sarasvati, is unmistakable.

Conclusion

Neither was there an Aryan invasion of the Indian subcontinent, nor did the Harappan Civilization ever die out. Civilization in India has a continuity starting right from the independent, indigenous, autochthonous development of agriculture and settled lifestyle around 7000 BCE. The stunning discovery of the ancient bed of the River Sarasvati – eulogized as the cradle of the Vedic culture – and of a large number of "Indus Valley" sites on its banks makes a compelling case for at least an overlap, if not outright oneness, of the Harappan Civilization and the Vedic culture.

It is a very dismal commentary on the authors of history textbooks in India that generation after generation of students are kept in the dark about evidence that

dramatically alters the picture of the earliest beginnings of Indian civilization, and pushes back the dates of the glorious Vedic culture by a few millennia. It is particularly shameful that students should continue to be taught theories, which, not being based on any evidence that can stand up to scrutiny, would not even rise to the level of being wrong.

Further reading:

1. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* by J. Mark Kenoyer (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1998)
2. *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* by Gregory L. Possehl (AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek CA, 2003)
3. *The Sarasvati Flows on: The Continuity of Indian Culture* by B. B. Lal (Aryan, New Delhi, 2002)
4. *Update on the Aryan Invasion Debate* by Koenraad Elst (Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi, 1999) – available freely online at http://www.voi.org/books/ait/